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# The EMS Experience

Saluting those with 20 years or more in EMS

**Robert Kelley, EMT-P**



*Robert Kelley, an EMT-P with Gatesville Volunteer Fire Department, began his career in the early 1970s following a short first aid and CPR class.*

## **What was your first day on the job in EMS?**

My first job was in the early 1970s with the newly formed Livingston County Ambulance Service in Howell, Michigan. My brother, Doug, and a friend, Jim, had been running the service since day one when the county established it, because the funeral homes were getting out of the ambulance business. The ambulance service was required to

hire a veteran and, since I had just gotten out of the military, Doug offered me a job. I said, "Yes," and after a short first aid and CPR class, I received a certificate as a "Certified Ambulance Attendant." That certification allowed me to ride in the back of the ambulance. Our station was the basement of a house, our ambulance was a converted Ford Van, call sign L-25, and my pay was \$7660.00 per year. Livingston County is 584 square

miles, and we covered it with just a couple of rigs.

## **Which services have you worked for over the years?**

I have worked for the Brighton Volunteer Fire Department in Michigan, Livingston County Ambulance Service (Michigan), Stratmoor Hills Volunteer Fire Department (Colorado), the City of Howell Volunteer Fire Department in Michigan; the City of Naples Fire Department in Florida; Killeen Fire Department (Texas), and am now with the Gatesville Volunteer Fire Department.

## **Why did you get into EMS?**

Why I got into EMS had nothing much to do with EMS itself. In 1968 I was assigned to C Troop, 3rd Squadron, 4th Cavalry, 25th Infantry Division, stationed in Cu Chi, South Vietnam. Our Troop had tanks and armored personnel carriers, and I was assigned to the 1st platoon. I was part of the crew on our lieutenant's armored personnel carrier (track). Our medic, "Doc" Hitchcock, and I became close friends. Whenever we got into a firefight, Doc would jump off the track with his aid bag, no weapons, and run to the injured. I made a decision that whenever Doc left the track I would go with him to keep the bad guys off him and give him a hand when he needed it. Doc always knew exactly what to do and didn't get rattled, no matter what was going

on around him. His treatment of our wounded made a lasting impression on me.

### **How has the field changed since you've been in it?**

In the '70s we carried boards for splints, a wide variety of bandages, and the only drug we carried was oxygen. Speed was a big factor in treating our patients. The faster we transported the patient to a hospital, the better our service was. Traveling 90 to 100 mph was not uncommon. In 1982 I was hired by the Killeen Fire Department and discovered that speed had been replaced by better medical care and intensive training. My paramedic training took a year, a far cry from that simple first aid course. We now have advance telemetry, a wide variety of meds for the heart, diabetic meds, the ability to talk with a physician and a lot of other major advances. It's interesting to me that even with all these changes, bandaging and splinting have remained basically the same.

### **Is there a particular moment or call that stands out?**

I know people will guess the Luby's shootings but, besides being the most significant and devastating incident of my career, the most satisfying calls were those where you made an immediate and dramatic impact on someone's life. Like a severe asthmatic who can't breathe one minute and is smiling at you the next after your treatment, or when you are visited at the station by a little girl who was hit by a car, and she gives you a hug. Or getting thanked personally by the father who had to be talked



*In 1991, Robert Kelley was one of the first to respond at the scene of the mass shooting at Luby's in Killeen.*

through CPR over the phone to save his two-year-old daughter's life. That's some pretty powerful stuff. Those are the kinds of calls that stand out.

### **What has been your favorite part of your career in EMS?**

It's hard to pick out just one part so I'll give you two. The first is delivering babies. There is nothing to compare to the feeling you get when you bring a new life into the world and you are the very first one to touch it. That produces

a feeling that no drug can ever match. The second part is teaching. Whether it is in a college setting or at a department level, teaching someone EMS is very satisfying. A radio personality has said many times that words mean things, and it is so true in EMS. Teaching someone from start to finish and then hearing them say "It was just like you said" is music to my ears. And the friends you make—one of my partners went on to become a heart surgeon. Wait, that's three things.